How has the historical representation of women in Nazi Germany changed since 1933?

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MHPG914 Weimar and Nazi Germany

It is axiomatic to state that historians have 'not been able to agree' on the role of women during the 12 years of Nazi rule in Germany from 1933-1945.[1] In the years since, conflicting historical accounts have emerged over the degree to which women enabled the regime to secure and maintain its power. Nazi ideology and practice reflect several key paradoxes which have also strongly impacted the ways in which women's history within the regime has been portrayed; one of these is the conflict between the promoted image of an 'idealised' Nazi woman as a mother and homemaker, and the regime's need to satisfy its economic labour needs in order to sustain the German war effort. Most historical portrayals have focused on the impact of the regime's policies *on* women and on the fact that the Nazi Party politicised the female body, while actively promoting a sub-ordinate role for women within German society. This largely resulted in early historical representations employing a 'top-down' view of women as a broad category of victims whose personal agency was usurped by the state and who, theoretically, were therefore not responsible for the actions of the state. However, studies from the late 20th century onwards have revealed a more multi-faceted picture of women's experiences, asserting that women not only possessed agency within the Nazi system, but that middle and upper class women were a powerful force who actively shaped the success of Nazi programs and consequently the course of the war.

The purpose of this essay is not to uncover the experiences of all women living within the Nazi regime - such as Jewish women, gypsy women or resistant women. Rather, this essay is concerned with the role played by 'ordinary' German (Aryan) women within the regime who as a group within the dominant (non-Jewish) population constituted the approximately 80% of

[1] Christian Leitz, *The Third Reich* (Blackwell Publishing, USA, 1999), p. 209.

women living within the Third Reich who were compliant with the *fascist* system.[2] This majority of German women either openly supported or quietly acquiesced to the policies of the Nazis and consequently their choices and behaviours *actively shaped* the course of history for 12 years in Germany, making them much more than an historical backdrop to men's history. While further research and interpretations of women's role are still needed, contemporary findings have shown that German women cannot be historically absolved of a shared responsibility for the devastation inflicted by Hitler's Nazi Party.

In the 80 years since Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in 1933, a sizeable shift in historical representations has occurred from a blanket view of women as victims of the militant, patriarchal forces of Nazism to a more nuanced exploration of the ways in which women possessed and demonstrated personal agency, in light of the anti-feminist nature of the Nazi government. Instead of viewing women as disempowered victims who had oppressive Nazi policies forced upon them, more recent studies have illuminated the great differences between various groups of women within society - especially based upon age, class and religion – and how these groups were able to pursue personal advantage within an inherently sexist regime. Contemporary historiographies have challenged a number of earlier claims and the result is a revised historical perspective. This new historicism includes: a questioning the totality of the regime in light of the fact of mass female resistance to 'total war' employment initiatives; an undermining of the notion of a uniformity of women's experiences; and an unveiling of a wider scale of specific female participation and cooperation with instruments of Nazi terror. Together, these more recent findings create a renewed image of women during the Nazi era not only as the objects of a repressive regime but as subjects who were complicit with Nazi ideologies and policies; moreover, women have also been found to have been active historical agents who were influential in shaping the implementation and direction of key policies.

Early historiographies of women focused on the impact of Nazi policies *on* women, with women portrayed as passive within the system. These were histories of what men did *to* women and are reflective of the broader patriarchal sentiments which prevailed in the early and mid-20th c. For example, the American sociologist Clifford Kirkpatrick wrote in 1937 that 'women

[2] Erich Johnson, "German Women and Nazi Justice: Their Role in the Process from Denunciation to Death," *Historical Social Research* 20(1995), p. 51.

experienced a great longing for simplicity that made them turn deaf ears to the cool intellectual warnings', thus he simplifies the capacity for women to comprehend the political climate or their role within it. Kirkpatrick asserted that 'in the beginning women played a humble part... [they] merely cooked, nursed and supplied applause for the marching men".[3] Within this view of women as passive, child-like creatures it follows as logical that they would not in time be apportioned blame for the events which followed the commencement of war in 1939.

Similarly, much of the early historiographies reflected the values of the Nazi Party towards women as central to understanding the role of women. This included the notions expounded by Hitler that "the world of the woman is a smaller world for her world is her husband, her family, her children and her home", with such precepts being once viewed as encapsulating the nature of women's social role and function in the Third Reich. More recently, however, Nazi propaganda has been used by contemporary historians as a launching-pad for more complex and contradictory arguments about the nature of women's role.[4] Similarly, Nazi official positioning of women by Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels in 1933 has often been used to convey the traditional view of women *under* the regime: 'a woman's first and most fitting place is in the family'.[5] Importantly, these perceptions of women by male historians or male Nazis are not *ipso facto* the same as women's perspectives of their role within the Nazi system, and the constructed image of the passive housewife and mother has been shown to strongly contrast much of the newly discussed evidence about female activity at the time. The rejection of a blanket view of women, seen predominantly as innocent victims of a patriarchal regime, is the area of historiography which has been most challenged by historians writing after the second wave of feminism from the 1970s.

A great contributor to this re-dressing of women's history in Nazi Germany is Claudia Koonz, whose seminal work *Mothers in the Fatherland* (1987) exposed the gross inadequacies of earlier historiographies which she claimed had 'excluded half of the Germans who made

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[3] Clifford Kirkpatrick, "Recent Changes in the Status of Women and the Family in Germany," *American Sociological Review* 2 (1937), p. 651.
[4] Charu Gupta, "Politics of Gender: Women in Nazi Germany," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26 (Apr 1991), p. 40.
[5] Ute Frevert, *Women in German History* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1989), p. 208.

dictatorship, war and genocide possible'.[6] She condemned earlier representations of women as historical non-actors, claiming that they were merely posited within historical accounts as 'part of a timeless backdrop' against which Nazi men had made history.[7] Similarly, in her work *The Nazi Organisation of Women,* Jill Stephenson asserted that to suggest women were naïve to the repressive actions of the Nazis is 'at best an oversimplification' of events at the time.[8] Writing in the late 1980s, Koonz systematically explored the ways in which women actively contributed to the Nazi state on both a personal and collective level. In turn, her work has also been criticized, namely due to her lack of distinction between the personal and structural roles of women.[9] Koonz's key achievements, however, lay in her highlighting of the different contributions made by women based on age, class and Christian denomination (Catholic or Anglican). She argued that women supported Hitler 'from conviction, opportunism and active choice', and that the overly misogynistic nature of Nazism actually created opportunities for women to have agency, based upon the general male dismissal of them.[10] Koonz also argued that women acted as 'enablers' to the brutality of Nazism through their role as homemaker, in which they 'made the world a more pleasant place in which to live' by constructiing a facade of civilization within a barbaric political system.[11] Adding to the idea of women as willing participants within the Nazi system, Koonz conveyed the ways that pro-Nazi women, such as Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, would 'fondly recall' their participation in the Nazi Women's Organisation (NSF) in the post-war years.[12] In 1999, Adeheid Von Saldern reflected on Koonz's work and highlighted its significance in proving the value of women's support in achieving and maintaining Nazi stability.[13] Similarly, Leila Rupp's review of *Mothers in the Fatherland* celebrated Koonz's move away from an 'oppressive model' of women's history, urging new historiographies to 'go on to confront the

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[6] Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1987), p.3.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Jill Stephenson, *Nazi Organisation of Women* (London Croom Helm Ltd, 1981), p. 35.
[9] Leitz, *The Third Reich,* p. 214.
[10] Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland,* p. 5.
[11] Ibid., p. 17.
[12] Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, Marion A. Kaplan, *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), p.22.
[13] Leitz, *The Third Reich,* p. 209.

implications of women's participation in Nazi society.'[14] In this way, Koonz's work on women in Nazi Germany is particularly renowned for its assertion that 'far from remaining untouched by Nazi evil, women operated at its very centre'.[15]

The pervasiveness of women within the Nazi system is a theme picked up on by other contemporary historians, notably Erich Johnson, Matthew Stibbe, Leila Rupp and Jill Stephenson. Together, their findings blast the notion of women as passive, apolitical historical non-agents, clearly out of the water and set the agenda for a new, more complex understanding of the role of women within the Third Reich. Erich Johnson's 1995 article on the involvement of women within different levels of the Nazi judicial system quashed the idea of the ordinary German woman as a 'shrinking violet' who surrendered to the rule of men while simultaneously living in fear of the Gestapo. Johnson demonstrated that women were in fact 'important actors in the Nazi control apparatus at the local level, both as denouncers and as witnesses'.[16] He also claims that 'most women found little in the Nazi regime to criticize, at least not openly' and that 'many women acted to support the regime by turning in people who deviated against the regime to the Gestapo'.[17] While he baulks at the radical perspective offered by Ute Frevert that women were actually better off under Nazism than in the Weimar years, Johnson certainly establishes the claim that women generally 'did not perceive the Third Reich as a woman's hell' and that they were content to work with the system directly.[18] While women were less politically active than men, Johnson reveals that they none-the-less made a significant contribution to the course of Nazi justice and that this involvement increased during the war years as women picked up the role of community self-policing in the absence of men who were away fighting. He offers a conservative estimate that they made up a quarter of the official denouncers and one-fifth of witnesses in denouncement cases for crimes against the state.[19] Where traditional views of women do come into effect, is in the amount of weight given to the testimony of various women based on their age and marital status by the Nazi

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[14] Leila Rupp, "Third Reich, Second Sex: Review of Mothers in the Fatherland," *The Women's Review of Books*, 4 (1987), p. 3.
[15] Leitz, *The Third Reich,* p. 213.
[16] Johnson, "German Women and Nazi Justice," p. 33-4.
[17] Ibid., p.38.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., p. 46-7.

authorities, with Johnson arguing a Nazi preference for testimony from married housewives over single or employed women.[20] While some women may have quietly endured Nazism, Johnson reveals that a considerable number embraced the new order and actively worked with it.

Beyond cooperation with the Gestapo and Nazi judicial systems, Matthew Stibbe's text *Women in the Third Reich* (2003) itemizes direct actions taken by women who worked with Nazi structures, including the Race-Political Office of the Nazi Party, the SS Race and Resettlement Office, and the SS-*Frauencorps*. Through their *frauenwerk* as mid-wives and nurses, women voluntarily complied with the August 1933 decree that all 'deformed' births should be reported to the local Health Office and in other medical realms they assisted with state-sanctioned 'mercy' killings.[21] From November 1939, female nurses assisted with the transportation of 'euthanasia' candidates to the 'T-4' killing centres and evidence suggests that they performed these duties willingly and under no duress.[22] According to the findings of Michael Burleigh, 'literally hundreds of nurses and nursing orderlies…became, in effect, murderers or accomplices to murder during the war'.[23] One survivor of the Eichberg Asylum bore witness to a deliberate murder by a nurse in 1942 in which the nurse 'pulled the hair of an old woman…and repeatedly struck her head against the floor until the woman was dead'.[24] It is clear from recent studies such as Stibbe's that women were directly involved in facilitating Nazi eugenics policies and did so both knowingly and willingly. Furthermore, it is the areas of overlap between the public and private spheres – such as reproduction and aged care - that have become the central focus of concern in more recent historical debates.[25]

Outside the medical sphere, female school teachers and social workers have also been found to have frequently collaborated with the Nazis and enacted formal policies of harassment.[26] Of the females who worked within the SS, Stibbe found that almost all of them came from 'normal'

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[20] Ibid., p. 49.
[21] Matthew Stibbe, *Women in the Third Reich* (London: Hodder Headline Group, 2003), p. 75.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., p. 76.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Leitz, *The Third Reich,* p. 213.
[26] Stibbe, *Women in the Third Reich,* p. 76.

lower-middle and working class backgrounds.[27] Female SS guards, while comparatively few in number, were found to be capable of being as 'brutal and sadistic' as their male SS counterparts; in particular, notorious SS guard Irme Griese was known as the 'blonde angel of death' for the power she wielded erratically and the fear she instilled in the women she held authority over at Auschwitz-Birkenau.[28] Even the wives of SS officers were directly and indirectly involved in Nazi war crimes through their exploitation of their husband's power, their voyeurism of their husband's work or through their appropriation of Jewish property.[29] In various ways, women played an active rather than passive role in the formal and informal administering of Nazi policies. Women were also frequently co-observers, co-listeners, co-possessors of guilty knowledge, even more often than they were co-perpetrators.[30] What they were not, is completely ignorant of their political reality and expropriated from its daily functions and processes. According to Jill Stephenson's work, Germany's defeat in the war was ultimately a defeat of arms and not a reflection of internal collapse or subversion.[31]

Nazi organizational leadership, such as that offered by Gertrud Scholtz-Klink as head of the Women's Organisation (NFS) from 1933, also conveyed the capacity for women to contribute in the new Nazi state. While there were areas of conflict or contention within women's groups, Nazi organisations demonstrated a desire on the part of women to embrace the new regime and effectively to work with it. By 1936, one-third of women were NFS members and Koonz suggests that the NFS 'offered a counter-balance to the authority of husbands and fathers', in other words, it provided an opportunity for women to channel their desire for action and autonomy within an anti-feminist system.[32] Interestingly, Protestant women were among the first to drop their apolitical stance in 1933 and support a state which denied them equality in economic or political spheres.[33] However, the new women's organisations also revealed new cleavages 'along generational lines' as the young embraced Nazism with flexibility and older

[27] Ibid., p. 77.
[28] Ibid., p. 77-78.
[29] Ibid., p. 78.
[30] Leitz, *The Third Reich,* p. 225.
[31] Stephenson, *Nazi Organisation of Women*, p. 200.
[32] Leitz, *The Third Reich,* p. 218.
[33] Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland,* p. 232.

women were less malleable to change.[34] On the whole, Protestant women embraced a state which 'promised to support their talents as mothers and organisers' and the Nazis and Protestants 'cooperated together around a shared concern for motherhood.[35] Catholic women were slower to act, waiting 'with silence' until the Concordat was signed with Rome in July 1933; news of the agreement is reported as having 'transformed women leader's silence into acceptance'. [36] Catholic women's responses were generally more tempered than their Protestant sisters; however, they still ranged from active support of state-sponsored killings to silent complicity with the new regime, thus reinforcing the multiplicitous nature of women's involvement with the regime.[37]

Apart from religious denomination, class was the single largest factor in shaping women's roles within Nazi society and the capacity of middle and upper class women to avoid conformity to state demands for increases in female labour effectively demonstrates that women certainly had agency within the Nazi regime and were capable of using it to further their own needs. Nowhere was this clearer than in the preparedness of middle and upper class women to evade state calls to contribute their labour and their willingness to leave the burden of manual work to fall on the shoulders of working class women.[38] Nazi ideologies about the role of women as homemakers conflicted strongly with the economic reality of war production; however, efforts to conscript women into war work were tempered by the concurrent belief that 'women were part of the population on whom…general hardships should not arbitrarily or continuously be inflicted'.[39] Apart from a concern over alienating female subjects, the Nazis were also keen to avoid offending males who had expressed disapproval over state efforts to force their wives into paid or voluntary employment. [40] Leila Rupp claims that the regime's hesitancy in compelling all women to work 'was *not* of an ideological order, but was rooted in the well-founded fear that civil conscription for women would be extremely unpopular, both with

[34] Ibid., p. 236.
[35] Ibid., p. 240-41.
[36] Ibid., p. 275.
[37] Ibid., p. 302.
[38] Jill Stephenson, "Women's Labor Service in Nazi Germany," *Central European History* 15 (1982): p. 258.
[39] Tim Mason, "Women in Germany, 1925-1945: Family, Welfare and Work. Part 1," *History Workshop* 1 (1976): p. 86.
[40] Ibid.

women and with men'.[41] Rupp's depiction of upper middle and upper class women flaunting 'their wealth and leisure' portrays an image of a considerable portion of women possessing a degree of power and status within a repressive state.

That the capacity of middle and upper class women to evade employment created friction with the working classes is evidenced from Nazi opinion reports which made clear that 'women already working under strict legal controls bitterly resented the lack of a general conscription measure.[42] In effect the female labour force increased by a mere 1% during the war and Rupp states that the failure of the Nazis to enforce female subscription resulted in their failure to engage in a total war.[43] Hitler's unwillingness to force unpopular measures onto the middle classes meant that propaganda was the main device used to harness female employment; however, within this situation women from the middle classes used their social power to refuse to respond 'to the demands made upon them by the regime' and in doing so out-maneuvered the government and undermined its capacity to act with full authority.[44]

Ultimately the broadest shift in the historiographies of women during the Nazi era is from a perception of women as historical non-agents who were universally oppressed by the Nazi's politicisation of the female body, marriage and family life, to a far more complex and nuanced view of women as agents in their own right who indeed shaped and re-shaped the course of history through their choices and actions. Historiographically, a 'sliding scale' of experiences and contributions is emerging, in which cleavages based upon class, religious denomination and age are now visible as key factors which impacted the ways in which women responded to the Nazi regime. Women's experiences are increasingly being written from the perspective of women rather than the perspective of Nazi policies and propaganda – they are now subjects not objects of Nazi rule. What is being gained from this shift is a deeper appreciation of the ineffectiveness of simplistic labels like 'innocent' or 'guilty' when it comes to understanding the actions and motivations of women at the time. No doubt, a somewhat 'messier' picture is emerging of how women existed during the 12 years of Nazi rule but it is in the imperfect

[41] Leila Rupp, "Women, Class and Mobilisation in Nazi Germany," *Science and Society* 43 (1979): p. 56.
[42] Ibid., p. 52.
[43] Ibid., p. 53.
[44] Ibid., p. 56.

details that a more human image can be constructed, one that does justice to the real lives of the women in Germany at the time.

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